



Laura Marie Duncan Jr.

Tony winner Sutton Foster appears at Feinstein's at the Nikko through Sunday.

CABARET REVIEW

Broadway star power, and finesse, at Nikko

By David Wiegand

There's an old showbiz rubric against sharing a stage with animals or children, but double Tony winner Sutton Foster was willing to chance it when she christened the new Feinstein's at the Nikko on Wednesday night.

Midway through her set, the star of "Thoroughly Modern Millie," "Little Women," "The Drowsy Chaperone" and "Anything Goes," among other shows, announced she was going to invite the "man in my life" to join her onstage: It was her largely toothless dog, Linus, who sat nonchalantly on her lap as she sang a medley of "It Only Takes a Moment" and "Time After Time."

It's true that he yawned once his co-star started singing, but he was the only one who did in the sold-out room that has replaced the former Rrazz Room at the hotel.

'Nice and Easy'

Accompanied by pianist-arranger Michael Rafter, Sutton opened her show with "Nice and Easy," which is just how she performed it: Standing almost perfectly still in a short, loose-fitting teal dress, she offered a delicately controlled performance to match the song's lyrics.

Foster has a big voice and a voice with a whole lot of range. If you've heard her on a Broadway stage, you know what I'm talking about. She also knows how to adapt her instrument to an intimate room like Feinstein's, although she was just as much in command when she went off mike with Linus on her lap and

when she let loose with her encore song, "Anything Goes."

Really, who needs electronic amplification when you've got that kind of voice?

But Foster proved herself much more than "just" a Broadway belter through the 18 songs making up her opening-night show. There were delicate interpretations of wistful, girlish songs like "It's Crazy (But I'm in Love)" and "My Heart Was Set on You." Even John Denver's "Sunshine on My Shoulders" was given new life through Foster's finely nuanced performance.

Foster fits comfortably into the ingenue she has

Sutton Foster: 8 p.m. Friday (May 10), 7 and 10:30 p.m. Saturday, 7 p.m. Sunday. Feinstein's at the Nikko, 222 Mason St., S.F. \$75-\$95. www.hotelnikko.com

been in so many shows, but she was careful to make sure there wasn't an overabundance of sunshine on her shoulders: She was just as convincing with the hymn to cynicism, "Down With Love," and with the wistful "The People You Never Get to Love."

The song mix was as smart as the performance. Of course there were Broadway tunes, such as the two Sondheim numbers, "Anyone Can Whistle" segueing into "Being Alive." And there were tried and true standards — "I Get a Kick" and "Georgia on My Mind." But in between, Foster offered a number of unexpected songs, like Christine Lavin's comic "Air Conditioner" and Harry Nils-

son's "Good Old Desk." She knew better than to try to mess around with "Nearness of You," and while her performance was lovely, it wasn't really a highlight of the show. Foster is great at whatever she sings, but when she can tell a story in song, inhabit a character or point of view, as she does with "Lies of Handsome Men," for example, she's even better.

Bay Area connection

At 17, she lived in San Francisco for eight weeks while she was performing in the first national tour of "The Will Rogers Follies" at the Golden Gate Theatre. And she was back a couple of years ago for a show with Bay Area Cabaret. Otherwise, she was never a regular on the local cabaret scene.

But after 15 years of being a Broadway baby, she's recently moved to Los Angeles, in part because of her starring role in the ABC Family show "Bunheads."

She says she likes California, has bought a car and downloaded an earthquake app for her smartphone. Best of all, the fact that she's in Los Angeles may mean the Bay Area will see more of her in the future.

Foster is at Feinstein's through Sunday, and then back in the area Aug. 1 for "Broadway Under the Stars" in Sonoma.

David Wiegand is The San Francisco Chronicle's executive features editor and TV critic. E-mail: dwiegand@sfbchronicle.com Twitter: @WaitWhat_TV
